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# ‘There Is No Alternative’: Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence and Its Relationship with High Culture

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*Abstract:* This article uses the concept of high culture to assess the underlying assumptions and philosophy of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (CfE). For the most part, these remain vague and unarticulated. This has two consequences. First, a consensus forms easily around CfE because it means different things to different stakeholders and is presented to teachers as a depoliticised and technocratic policy response. Second, because its core tenets are so hazy, it is extremely difficult to argue against. Although CfE is widely regarded to have at its heart some form of constructivism, the justification for such an approach is never articulated. By assessing CfE’s relationship with high culture, this article attempts to flush out its implicit core assumptions. Its central argument is that CfE cannot simultaneously please everyone. Perfectly justifiable alternative curricular paths have been abandoned. Far from being a technocratic and depoliticised policy response, CfE is in fact a much more controversial and ideological shift than the level of scrutiny it has thus far received would suggest.

*Key words:* Scotland, education policy, curriculum, high culture, Curriculum for Excellence

Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence (CfE) enjoys widespread support not only from the four main Scottish political parties, but also from teachers’ unions, local authorities and official education bodies. This consensus also extends to university education departments: although there has been much criticism about the implementation of CfE, there is scarcely any dissent from the notion that it is a move in the right direction (but see Paterson, 2013). Indeed, it sometimes appears that there is not a single question in Scottish education to which CfE is not the answer. It will simultaneously: prepare students better for the world of work (Allan, 2014); help to close the attainment gap (Allan, 2015); improve literacy and numeracy (see, for instance, Scottish Government, 2008: 8); promote interdisciplinary learning (Scottish Government, 2008: 21); promote deep learning and subject disciplines (Education Scotland, 2015a); and make learning enjoyable (Education Scotland, 2015b).

This article argues that it is possible for the Scottish political, professional and academic consensus to bear the weight of these disparate aims because the underlying assumptions of CfE remain open to interpretation. The ‘Four Capacities’, for instance, are so vague and banal that it is hardly possible for any reasonable person to disagree with them. Although the underlying philosophy for CfE has been identified as constructivism (Priestley and Humes, 2010), I argue that not all of its CfE’s supporters can possibly subscribe to such a position. Moreover, the practical consequences of such a radical stance are never fully articulated.

This article aims therefore to sift through the confusion and flush out the core assumptions of CfE. It does so using the concept of high culture, which Matthew Arnold construes as ‘the best which has been thought and said in the world’ (Arnold, 1990[1869]: 6). It assesses how far CfE supports the transmission of a body of

knowledge that might be considered 'canonical' and considers whether it accepts any basis upon which one piece of art may be judged to be superior to another. In doing so, I hope to start the process of moving towards a concrete definition of CfE that will allow it to be debated and evaluated.

This article proceeds in three stages. First, I briefly try to place CfE in the context of curricular reforms. It is presented as a technocratic and depoliticised policy response to the challenges of education in the twenty-first century. However, there is broad agreement that it has never been satisfactorily defined. Second, by examining its relationship with high culture, I derive six core CfE propositions. I argue that its uncontroversial packing conceals a radically relativist core. It also marks the decisive abandonment of the Scottish idea of the 'democratic intellect'. Third, I discuss five possible justifications for a curriculum based on the six CfE principles I have identified. I conclude that it is logically impossible for CfE on its own to result in any improvement in attainment. Instead, it is just as likely that CfE will, at best, achieve nothing. There is also the danger that it will further entrench educational inequality.

### **What is CfE?**

CfE reflects wider trends in international education policy. There has been a move away from the prescription of curricular content. Many countries now prefer to specify processes or experiences and give schools much more freedom to shape what is to be taught (Sinnema and Aitken, 2013). In Scotland, CfE emerged from a national debate about education. It was rooted in part in the idea that the curriculum was over-prescribed and dominated by the demands of assessment. There has been a long process of implementation, which began in primary schools in 2010 (for a detailed discussion of the evolution of CfE, see Humes, 2013).

From the outset the exact philosophy and aims of CfE seem to have been confused (Gillies, 2006; Humes, 2013). Its dominant perspective, however, appears to be a form of constructivism (Priestley and Humes, 2010). Thus, although it is a mixture of different perspectives, it most closely resembles Muller and Young's (2010) 'Future 2' curriculum ideal type. Future 1 describes a curriculum that is wedded to a traditional and conservative view of schooling, based on educating elites. It ignores modern innovations and its content becomes calcified and out-dated. A Future 3 scenario describes a curriculum that preserves the integrity of subject disciplines but is open to their continual refreshment and their being combined in order to introduce pupils to powerful knowledge and concepts. Finally, and most relevant for CfE, a Future 2 scenario is one in which there is a 'steady weakening of boundaries, a de-differentiation of knowledge and institutions, a blurring of labour market sectors, and a greater emphasis on generic outcomes rather than inputs as instruments of equalisation and accountability (Muller and Young, 2010: 18). CfE most closely matches this description.

Priestley and Biesta (2013) suggest that CfE embodies the values that they would associate with a 'progressive' approach to the curriculum. Thus, instead of the curriculum being a 'selection from culture' (Lawton, 1975), it is based on the 'need for schools to develop approaches to active learning (although this concept is rarely explicitly spelled out) and emphasizes the role of teachers as co-learners, and as facilitators of student learning' (Priestley and Biesta, 2013: 3).

CfE is at the most basic level no more and no less than the removal of content from the curriculum and its replacement with a vague framework into which individual schools and teachers must reinsert knowledge of their choosing. It is important to keep this central fact in mind when assessing claims about improvements

in attainment as a result of CfE. We will consider below whether CfE also prescribes pedagogy in the absence of knowledge.

### **CfE and High culture**

However, whilst it is possible to place CfE broadly in the context of wider curricular changes, it is much more difficult to arrive at a concise definition of what it is and what it is not. A recent OECD (2015: 38-45) report devoted five pages to discussing what CfE might be. It did not arrive at a firm conclusion.<sup>1</sup> Instead, the OECD (2015: 38) cautions that: 'Any simple capsule description will ignore its complex multi-dimensionality, and risks confounding the aspirational ideal with the variety of implementation on the ground.' Thus, five years after the beginning of its implementation, 'CfE's scope still needs clarification' (OECD, 2015: 11).

This is a serious problem. Unless we pin down the boundaries of what is and what is not 'CfE', then it is impossible to assess it or discuss alternatives. As Gillies (2006: 30) argues, the values of a curriculum should be explicit: 'This is essential to permit proper examination of the basis to the curriculum, for it to be open to democratic challenge, and to permit any future modification and change.' If anything is permissible under CfE, then it is not strictly a curricular reform; it is the removal of any notion of a curriculum. Like John Griffith's famous observation about the British Constitution, CfE would simply be 'what happens' (quoted in King, 2007: 4). Since it is unlikely that policy-makers had this in mind, we are left with the task of trying to work out where the last curriculum ended and CfE began.

One way to do this is to place the vague statements about CfE directly next to a more explicit stance and assess how far CfE differs. In this article, I propose to do this by deliberately contrasting CfE with Matthew Arnold's notion of 'the best which has been thought and said' or 'high culture'. I use this as a yardstick against which to measure the implicit assumptions of CfE. Since there is no explicit statement of its values and principles, we have to infer the core tenets of CfE from what is implied in its official documentation.

I therefore suggest there are six propositions at the heart of CfE. These are deliberately designed to provoke and probe the limits of what CfE considers to be important. It may be that I am wrong in suggesting that one (or more) of these statements applies to CfE. However, I hope that these suggestions will allow us to move towards a clearer definition. If the true definition of CfE is so malleable that it cannot be captured, then it is impossible for it to fail. Every good piece of news or data may be used as evidence of its success; every bad piece of news can simply be put down to poor implementation.

My six propositions are the following:

1. It is perfectly acceptable for students to leave school with the impression that human civilization began around 1500.
2. It is perfectly acceptable for students to leave school having never come across Shakespeare, Bach or Michelangelo.

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<sup>1</sup> Despite the report's repeated statements about the limitations of its evidence and methodology (see, in particular, page 9: 'This summary is not an evaluation of CfE, however, and indeed the evidence is not available for such an evaluation' and page 18: '...the evaluation of CfE as a programme has not been done'), the Scottish Government still presented it as an endorsement of CfE.

3. There is no common basis upon which we can say that one piece of art is any greater than another: Katie Price's (2011) autobiography and Schubert's *Winterreise* are of equal cultural value.
4. Teachers have the broad and detailed disciplinary knowledge to be able to select the most appropriate content.
5. Content is subservient to the skills to be taught. Students arrive at work or university with the same skills that they have acquired through (or regardless of) different content.
6. There is no common Scottish (or indeed human) intellectual, cultural or literary inheritance that should be passed on to the next generation.

I discuss each of these propositions in detail below.

*Proposition 1: It is perfectly acceptable for students to leave school with the impression that human civilization began around 1500.*

In CfE the academic discipline of history is subsumed within the broader theme of 'people, past events and societies' (Scottish Government, 2010: 279). However, within this broad theme, CfE does not prescribe the particular 'people, past events and societies' that should be studied or in what order. It does not prescribe a chronology of events that would help students form a 'schema' or historical framework in which to accommodate new facts. Instead, the precise content or periods to be studied have to be selected by individual schools (see Scottish Government, 2010: 282-285). As Rata (2012: 131) points out, 'In the absence of specific detail about content in subjects such as English and History, the student is left 'thinking', 'understanding', 'examining', 'exploring' and all the other verbs that denote doing something with knowledge but without referring to the actual knowledge that is the raw material for the action.'

We are therefore led to conclude that CfE views history as a skills-based discipline and does not attach much importance to the periods of history to be studied or the order in which they should be studied. Two consequences flow from this. First, students might leave school with a detailed but unconnected knowledge of certain periods of history. Second, students might never be exposed to any history before the twentieth century, let alone the sixteenth. For instance, students are not required by CfE to learn anything about the ancient world and its cultural and intellectual achievements. This is up to individual schools and teachers to decide. One pupil might leave primary school with a detailed knowledge of the Wars of Independence; another's history education might have begun with the Industrial Revolution. CfE does not distinguish between these two outcomes. Both are of equal educational value.

*Proposition 2: It is perfectly acceptable for students to leave school having never come across Shakespeare, Bach or Michelangelo.*

*Proposition 3: There is no common basis upon which we can say that one piece of art is any greater than another: Katie Price's autobiography and Schubert's Winterreise are of equal cultural value. CfE adopts a radically relativist position.*

Propositions 2 and 3 address the relativism that implicitly underpins CfE. It does not prescribe content. Decisions about content are left to individual teachers and schools. CfE therefore necessarily rejects the idea that, for instance, there is an English literary

canon that should be taught to students. Decisions about the literary worth of a text cannot be made at a national level because there is no agreed basis on which to do this. Thus, instead of confronting the difficulty of deciding the texts or content to be taught, CfE devolves the issue to individual classrooms.

It is therefore perfectly possible under CfE to attend a school in which Shakespeare, Bach and Michelangelo are not part of the curriculum. Access to high culture might therefore be allocated according to a student's postcode. It will depend entirely on how particular schools choose to use the freedom of interpretation they are given under CfE. As Muller and Young (2010: 23) argue, an under-stipulated curriculum may not present 'insurmountable obstacles for well-resourced schools that are able to recruit teachers with strong subject qualifications who can fill in the gaps. It is, however, inevitably a problem for schools servicing poor communities that cannot attract such teachers.' In Scotland, this may also lead to a widening gulf between different schools when it comes to high culture. Some schools (perhaps particularly private schools) will continue to teach the western canon in art, music and literature, even though they are not required by CfE to do so. Many schools will not.

The purpose of CfE is therefore not to furnish minds with beauty. It does not seek, in its own terms, to fill pails with knowledge: it seeks instead to create minds that are empty but agile vessels for unspecified future learning. Any content will do. There is no need to trouble students with difficult works such as the plays of Shakespeare because CfE aims to teach them the decontextualised skills to be able to deal with any kind of text. It does not recognise the idea of a 'canon' of art or literature.

*Proposition 4: Teachers have the broad and detailed disciplinary knowledge to be able to select the most appropriate content.*

Accepting propositions 1-3 supposes certain attributes on behalf of teachers: first, that they have the time, skills and interest to design a syllabus from scratch; second, that they have the broad and deep disciplinary knowledge that will enable them to select an appropriate range of content. As we have noted, the wheel must be reinvented in every school because CfE does not provide a syllabus or suggested content. This has profound and unacknowledged consequences for students. Most importantly: the limits of a teacher's knowledge become the limits of her students' world. If your teacher has never heard of Bach's *St Matthew Passion*, then neither will you. A McKinsey (2007) report famously noted that a school system cannot outperform its teachers. Neither can the knowledge content of CfE.

Of course, if one supports the relativist underpinnings of CfE contained in propositions 1, 2 and 3, then this is unremarkable. If you think there are common points of western civilization with which all students should be familiar, then CfE presents serious problems. Without a common framework for assessing the value of human achievements or any notion that there might be people willing to assist in doing so (for instance, in universities), children's access to high culture will be dependent on their teacher's own education and taste.

*Proposition 5: Content is subservient to the skills to be taught. Content is subservient to the skills to be taught. Students arrive at work or university with the same skills that they have acquired through (or regardless of) different content.*

CfE privileges skills over specific content. Children learn through an unspecified ‘wide range of texts’ (Scottish Government 2010: 129). It does not matter therefore whether you learn about the use of metaphor through the works of John Donne or Dizzee Rascal. The end product is the same. CfE therefore suggests that different groups of pupils from different schools will not be disadvantaged as they enter the workplace or university. They will have learned the same skills through ‘active learning’, using different content.

Simone Weil considered George Herbert’s ‘Love (III)’ to be ‘the most beautiful poem in the world’ (quoted in Drury, 2014: 9). CfE cannot entertain such a proposition because it would require the acceptance of a hierarchy of cultural worth and consequently the suggestion that all children have a right to access its heights. CfE deliberately avoids such judgements and cannot find any basis upon which they might be imposed on schools from Edinburgh. In some federal systems of government, the central government allows states autonomy to innovate but also requires a minimum level of service for all citizens. In CfE there is no floor standard for knowledge, art, music or literature.

*Proposition 6: There is no common Scottish (or indeed human) intellectual, cultural or literary inheritance that should be passed on to the next generation.*

Aside from the requirement that students study one Scottish text during Higher English, CfE has no sense of the importance of passing on a common intellectual or cultural heritage. For Newton, we see further by standing on the shoulders of giants. For CfE, there is no compelling case for the teaching of one specific body of knowledge over another. In a country such as Scotland, a case might be made for the value of the study of the thinking of the Scottish Enlightenment. However, in Scotland, access to Hume and Smith depends on teachers’ knowledge. They would only be included if they are deemed relevant to the skills to be imparted in a particular lesson. That this does not matter provided that students have learned appropriate transferable skills is a central CfE proposition. If CfE is successful in this regard, then no 18-year-old Scottish undergraduate should have the knowledge necessary to take part in *University Challenge*. Instead, she will have a stock of transferable skills designed to ensure that she contributes to the country’s economic growth.

### **Justifying CfE**

Having set out what I take to be the principles that underpin CfE, I now turn to look briefly at possible arguments that might be made in favour of them. I suggest there are five possible justifications for CfE:

1. Schools need to employ new pedagogies in order to teach better.
2. The selection of content is too difficult and controversial, so it should be left to individual schools and teachers.
3. The twenty-first century requires a different kind of curriculum.
4. Schools should prepare children for the workforce.
5. CfE will help to close the attainment gap.

I will now examine each of these arguments in turn.

*1. Schools need to employ new pedagogies in order to teach better.*

In common with other process-based curriculums, in place of content, CfE does appear to prescribe pedagogy (Rata, 2012). For instance, the core CfE document recommends ‘active’ learning in numeracy (Scottish Government, 2010: 40). In promoting this as a recommended technique, CfE enters a highly contested area. The meaning of ‘active learning’ is defined in broad and vague terms: ‘Active learning is learning which engages and challenges children's thinking using real-life and imaginary situations’ (Education Scotland, 2016a). However, once again, we may infer a more concrete definition from other CfE materials. Rote learning is discouraged; instead, learning should be more ‘fun’ and ‘relevant’ (see, for instance, Education Scotland 2016a). CfE best practice case studies suggest that teachers should use games or project-style activities to involve students in their learning.

However, the evidence on the effectiveness of this type of teaching is not clear-cut (see, for instance, Kirschner *et al.*, 2006). Indeed, a recent report into effective teaching practice concluded in relation to active learning that:

This claim is commonly presented in the form of a ‘learning pyramid’ which shows precise percentages of material that will be retained when different levels of activity are employed. These percentages have no empirical basis and are pure fiction. Memory is the residue of thought (Willingham, 2008), so if you want students to remember something you have to get them to think about it. This might be achieved by being ‘active’ or ‘passive’ (Coe *et al.*, 2014: 24).

Such reservations are not acknowledged in the CfE documentation and the promotion of ‘active’ learning is treated as a positive and obvious development in teaching practice. The danger of learning through projects or games is that children concentrate more on the process of the task, rather than on the material to be learned (Willingham, 2009: 53-54). They become experts on the intricacies of computer software, rather than on the topic of the geography lesson. In reality, the evidence for the effectiveness of ‘active’ learning is not compelling enough for it to be presented as best practice by the national curriculum. If a change in pedagogy is a central justification for CfE, then it is not a very strong one.

Glasgow City Council’s education policy document also prescribes attention to pupils’ learning styles and multiple intelligences. Specifically: ‘Young people should be supported in recognising their own learning style’ (Glasgow City Council, 2012: 6). There are perhaps few educational theories that have been as comprehensively discredited as learning styles (for a summary of the evidence, see Riener and Willingham, 2010). Yet the permissive and vague tone of national CfE documents allows such myths to be presented to teachers as best practice at the local authority level.

## *2. The selection of content is too difficult and controversial, so it should be left to individual schools and teachers.*

One of the justifications for the lack of content is that it helps to promote the professionalism and autonomy of teachers (although such an outcome is often conflated with the promotion of the interests of pupils). Such a proposition is highly debatable. In the case of CfE, for instance, surely there is an argument for saying that a teacher’s autonomy is undermined as much by prescription of pedagogy as by prescription of content? If the content to be taught must be left to the teacher’s professional judgement, then why not also the best way to teach it? On what basis does CfE prescribe pedagogy but not content? In this context, it seems perfectly



logical to argue, conversely, that when content is prescribed, this frees teachers from the burden of designing a separate syllabus for each and every school in Scotland, enabling them to use their professional judgement about how best to teach. In any case, it is difficult to see the merit in CfE prescribing forms of pedagogy for which there is little, if any, empirical evidence.

Another justification for the absence of content in CfE is that the selection of what is to be taught is inevitably difficult and controversial. For Priestley and Humes (2010: 348), for instance, a central question is: 'By whom? Despite epistemological attempts to define essential knowledge or to select from essential culture, such decisions remain fundamentally political and ideological.' Quite. However, those who make this argument appear to suggest that CfE provides some kind of solution to this problem. It does not. It merely avoids the question. It is content to ignore this fundamental and difficult issue provided content choices are made according to the ideology (or whims) of individual schools and teachers, rather than considered at a national level. It is not clear how this is any less controversial or problematic.

*3. The twenty-first century requires a different kind of curriculum.*

*4. Schools should prepare children for the workforce.*

Much of the justification for CfE seems to be based on a questionable interpretation of the demands of the twenty-first century. For instance, in his foreword to a major report, the Senior Chief Inspector of Schools reflected that: 'Scotland's future economic prosperity requires an education system within which the population as a whole will develop the kind of knowledge, skills and attributes which will equip them personally, socially and economically to thrive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century' (HM Inspectorate of Education, 2009: 1). Education Scotland (2016b) also states that there is the 'need to prepare our young people for life and work in an increasingly uncertain and rapidly changing economic and social environment.' Again, Glasgow City Council provides a telling example of how the fuzzy aims of CfE are interpreted on the ground. The introduction to its education strategy document states:

In the 21<sup>st</sup> Century we are preparing children and young people for a future world that we don't yet know, for jobs that don't yet exist and for a life that may be very different to today's way of living. The technological and information age continues to do so well into the future. Glasgow's children and young people deserve to be given the best possible opportunities to develop skills and attitudes which will serve them well throughout their lives. These include the ability to solve problems, to be creative and adapt to a changing environment, to apply new knowledge, to work and interact effectively with others and to be resilient in the face of adversity (Glasgow City Council, 2012: 1).

As an introductory statement of the aims of teaching and learning, this is at best problematic. It is not at all clear that the twenty-first century changes anything. Did the ancient Greeks not apply new knowledge? Did the Victorians build the railways without working and interacting effectively with others? Was the World War Two generation not resilient in the face of adversity? There is surely just as strong a case for arguing that the knowledge of subject disciplines is likely to serve Glasgow's children well into the future. Ben Goldacre, for instance, accepts that recent scientific discoveries might change our view of certain things. However:

Whilst this is true at the bleeding edges of various research fields, it's worth bearing in mind that Archimedes has been right about why

things float for a couple of millennia. He also understood why levers work, and Newtonian physics will probably be right about the behaviour of snooker balls forever (Goldacre, 2009: 237).

The over-excited view of the twenty-first century and the ‘anything goes’ attitude of national CfE documents mean that there is a serious danger that wide gaps will exist in children’s knowledge, both within and between schools. Although there are frequent statements about the teaching of knowledge in CfE documents (Priesley and Sinnema, 2014: 65-66), this is potentially in conflict with notions of ‘twenty-first century’ skills. This tension remains unresolved and open to interpretation. As Priestley and Sinnema (2014: 71) note, CfE has ‘greatly reduced the specification of content, de-emphasised the importance of knowledge in relation to other aspects (skills, competencies, etc.), and failed to provide explicit guidance on processes to the practitioners charged with developing them’. Thus, although high-level CfE statements continue to emphasise the importance of knowledge, the overall message is ambiguous. In the absence of explicit guidance to the contrary, therefore, a reasonable interpretation of CfE is that it is more important to concentrate on the ‘how’, rather than the ‘what’ of learning.

This is a particular problem in schools where teachers lack deep disciplinary knowledge or where they imagine that knowledge is of secondary importance in the twenty-first century. In fact, as Hirsch argues, the opposite is the case:

There is a consensus in cognitive psychology that it takes knowledge to gain knowledge. Those who repudiate a fact-filled curriculum on the grounds that kids can always look things up miss the paradox that de-emphasising factual knowledge actually disables children from looking things up effectively. To stress process at the expense of factual knowledge hinders children from learning to learn. Yes, the Internet has placed a wealth of information at our fingertips. But to be able to use that information – to absorb it, to add to our knowledge – we must already possess a storehouse of knowledge. That is the paradox disclosed by cognitive research (Hirsch, 2000: 2).

CfE is thus in danger of permitting a slimmed down curriculum where children are not encouraged to learn the bank of facts stored in long-term memory that are essential for critical thinking. As Daniel Willingham argues, ‘Factual knowledge must precede skill’ (Willingham, 2009: 25).

CfE also ties itself in knots in order to try to come up with a ‘future-proof’ definition of a text: ‘a text is the medium through which ideas, experiences, opinions and information can be communicated’ (Scottish Government, 2010: 23). This is an eccentric exercise but it reveals a great deal about the thinking behind CfE. Did the writers of this document seriously imagine that Scotland’s schools were in danger of producing students who could read novels and poems but struggle with text messages and emails? The danger is surely that the reverse is true. And even if it were not, could the authors of this document not imagine a case for schools as places of academic learning where the demands of the modern office or everyday life are subservient (for at least a few years of a child’s life) to the exploration through literature of what it means to be a human being? Are novels and poems in imminent danger of being replaced?

Finally, for those students who progress to university and more independent learning, does the twenty-first century require a different sort of curriculum? Again, the evidence for this is not compelling. First, as Daniel Willingham has pointed out, ‘Research from cognitive science has shown that the sorts of skills that teachers want

for students – such as the ability to analyse and think critically – *require* extensive factual knowledge’ (Willingham, 2009: 25, emphasis in original). CfE is silent on the importance of memorising facts.

Second, perhaps the vast majority of university studies continue to be fairly traditional. An expert will introduce the topic via a series of lectures. There will be a reading list of standard works on the topic (perhaps including a textbook) and the lecturer will try to show how thinking has subsequently developed. Students will have to write coherent essays and, most likely, sit an unseen exam. Students will be penalised for poor writing. There is just as strong an argument, therefore, that the best possible preparation for university is a broad knowledge of academic disciplines and extended practice of writing scholarly essays in standard written English.

#### *5. CfE will help to close the attainment gap.*

Considering all that we have discussed so far, this is the oddest of the claims made on behalf of CfE. In order to sustain such a proposition, we would have to accept that the poorest children were being held back by a combination of traditional teaching methods, overly prescribed content and a lack of interdisciplinary learning. There is little evidence for this. Indeed for CfE to result in any improvements in educational attainment, we would need to suppose that poorly performing schools in Scotland were struggling because their teachers were being denied the freedom to implement the superior curriculum that was inside their heads all along.

As we have noted, the CfE documentation is a study in vagueness: you could use it to justify the teaching of Ancient Greek to primary 4 or the necessity of scrapping subject disciplines. In many cases it is as good as having no curriculum at all. This means that the schools with the best teachers (those who were doing fine anyway) will continue to thrive. Those schools that were struggling have just had the most prescriptive guidance removed. It is not clear how this can possibly result in significant educational improvement.

It is perfectly possible, however, that CfE will create or entrench gaps between children from the richest and poorest homes. Some students will leave school able to listen to BBC Radio 4’s *Start the Week* and understand most of the literary and cultural allusions therein; others will never have this cultural understanding because their teachers’ interpretation of CfE privileged the playing of games and the development of skills over the acquisition of knowledge. Some students will be able to read a leader article in *The Economist* and recognise the references to British and American political history; others will be excluded from elite conversations about the future of politics. CfE does not even attempt to close this gap.

### **Conclusion**

I have attempted to clear away some confusion concerning the principles and purposes of Scotland’s Curriculum for Excellence. CfE is insulated from empirical or philosophical refutation because it is never satisfactorily defined. It is the dominant discourse in Scottish education, but it means different things to different people. By analysing its relationship with the concept of high culture, I have identified six propositions that appear to underlie CfE. CfE’s philosophical position is radically relativist.

However, the implications of this position are rarely acknowledged. Teachers select content from a free market of ideas. Unpopular ideas and content wither and fail in this intellectual marketplace. Similar arguments are made by right-wing think

tanks to oppose state subsidy of the arts. In the free market of ideas created by CfE, schools are free to innovate. However, they are also free to fail. It is therefore far from clear that CfE will lead to any improvements in Scottish education. Those schools that have always taught the Western canon in art, music and literature can continue to do so (the curriculum documentation is so vague as to permit anything). It is not clear what the others have been freed from.

In its refusal to justify learning in anything but an instrumental sense, CfE represents a final triumph of market liberalism in Scottish education. Curiously for the home of the Enlightenment, Scotland in 2017 appears to lack the intellectual self-confidence to defend the emancipatory and transformational power of knowledge. It prefers instead to justify its curriculum on the grounds that it will help young people on the 'job market' and furnish them with the skills needed for the twenty-first century. This unconditional surrender to the logic of the market is one of the most depressing elements of CfE. It would be unrecognisable to previous generations of great Scottish education reformers whose credo was the democratic intellect (Davie, 1961).

Finally, even if the central intention of CfE is to standardise pedagogy rather than content, then, again, it is not clear that it will lead to improvement. The claims made on behalf of the kind of 'active' learning promoted by CfE are, at best, contested. The CfE documentation does not acknowledge these shortcomings and in prescribing a preferred pedagogy arguably undermines teachers' autonomy and professionalism in exactly the way its supporters allegedly aspire to avoid.

At best, therefore, CfE will achieve little of real educational value. Those schools that performed well already have the freedom to continue to do so. At worst, it will further entrench the divide between those with access to high culture and those without. There is no compelling reason to imagine that it will on its own lead to a substantial (or equitable) increase in attainment.

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